

Members Quarterly

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feature

Creating a Culture of Innovation

A recipe for success

Creating a culture of innovation certainly takes work, but it's not as difficult as you may think. When you boil it down, all you really need are three ingredients: ordinary people, a structured process and executive leadership buy-in.

So grab a bowl and mixing spoon and let's stir up an innovation masterpiece!

Ingredient 1: Ordinary, even non-creative people

You really don't need a dream team of creative minds to come up with the greatest thing since sliced bread. This is because we are all different in the way we think. How we think is a key driver behind how we approach situations, problem-solve and innovate.

When you bring together a group of different thinkers who share similar characteristics such as open-mindedness, trust for others and trustworthiness, people will start spring-boarding off each other's ideas.

As a result, a group of "ordinary people" can actually come up with an amazingly wide range and number of original ideas to choose from.

Ingredient 2: A structured approach to innovation

You must always keep in mind that everyone operates inside their own "boxes" (or mental frameworks). Simply asking people to "think outside the box" is not enough to get the creative juices flowing. People need some form of structure to guide the pathway to innovation. In other words, they need process.

Let's look at the case of the City of Mississauga. Its annual City Managers Leadership Conference in 2009 had one objective — approach old problems in a different light. Using a structured innovation process, participants (each representing different mental frameworks) came up with a total of 500 ideas in just one day.

A structured approach to innovation also focuses on other important elements outside of ideas generation. Yes, there is more to innovation than ideation. This process can help you identify the right opportunities, root causes and contributing factors, select the "right" solution from the masses your group generates and map out an execution strategy.

In other words, where innovation is concerned, a process provides the guidance needed to increase group's output and also bring useful ideas to fruition.

Ingredient 3: Buy-in from executive leaders

The first two ingredients are in the bowl and mixed. Now, it's time for the final and probably most critical ingredient.

Regardless of whether an organization outwardly encourages innovative thinking, employees will always come up with ideas. Many of them will be good, possibly great.



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Sometimes employees' efforts are all for naught, particularly if their ideas don't align with the organization's strategic priorities.

All too often, innovation efforts fail because employees are unclear where to focus their innovation efforts. They put all their energy and time into A when they should actually be focusing on B. So when they excitedly present their idea to leadership only for that idea to be turned down, this can have a negative impact on their commitment to the organization.

Where innovation is concerned, executive leadership is especially important. Leaders must know how to foster innovative thinking, pinpoint exactly where it is needed in the organization and clearly communicate to employees and teams the key areas that most require innovation.

In other words, for innovation to really work, leaders must clarify where in the "innovation curve" they require every one's assistance.

Ready, set, bake

Most organizations understand the need for innovation, but few know how to go about creating such a culture.

Innovation does not have to be complex. Instead of getting discouraged before you even start, just look at innovation as three ingredients: people, structure and leadership.

With these three building blocks, you can begin to build a culture that energizes, guides and inspires its people, leading to breakthrough innovations and significant improvements in your organization.

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